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A pilot study investigating the relationship between tutorial participation and assessment performance

John Smith

Introduction

In this paper a tutorial is defined as “a group discussion session, usually chaired by the lecturer” (Habeshaw, Habeshaw and Gibbs, 1992) . The aim of a tutorial is to “promote active learning...facilitate good debate... and to provide a focus for discussion and interaction that requires students to prepare in advance” (Biggs, 2003) . The practice is often quite different. Anecdotal evidence suggests that tutorial attendance is irregular and many students are unprepared.

Literature review

Tutorial participation can be thought of as being made up of three elements:

- Preparation beforehand
- Attendance
- Active contribution in the session.

However, the literature on student participation in tutorials has tended to focus only on student attendance (Baderin, 2005; Paisey and Paisey, 2004; Sharma, Mendez and O'Byrne, 2005; Sharma, Millar and Seth, 1999) . This may be because attendance data is readily available (or at least is relatively easy to collect). However, while these studies generally reveal a positive relationship between attendance and assessment performance, they have two important limitations:

- First, by focusing on students' absence, they tend to reinforce a “blame-the-student” approach (Biggs, 2003)
- Second, these studies do not address what students actually *do* when they are in a tutorial. If we accept Biggs' proposition that “learning is the result of students' learning-focused activities” (2003: p. 20) then measuring student participation in terms of preparation and contribution as well as attendance presents a much more fruitful avenue for improved teaching practice.

The key difficulty is how tutorial participation can be measured.

This study attempts to address this problem by trialling a methodology for measuring students' own perceptions of their tutorial participation.

Methodology

To address the problem of measuring tutorial participation this study draws on the work of Baughin, Brod and Page (2000) who devised a self-evaluation questionnaire which allowed students to grade their level of participation on a 4-point scale. The research instrument used is closely based on this work and is summarised below.

Four

- You have participated voluntarily with a high degree of clarity
- You were fully prepared for the session and have completed the assigned preparatory work
- You were prepared to ask questions about anything you didn't understand
- You took an active part in group discussions

Three

- You have participated voluntarily with a fair degree of clarity
- You were prepared for the session and have completed the assigned preparatory work but you may have made some errors
- You were sometimes prepared to ask questions about things you didn't understand
- You took part in group discussions when prompted

Two

- You rarely participated voluntarily with a low level of clarity
- You were not sufficiently prepared for the session and your assigned preparatory work was either incomplete or contained some significant errors
- You were generally reluctant to ask questions about anything you didn't understand
- You were only partially engaged in group discussions

One

- You did not participate unless asked directly or you were unable to communicate your answers clearly
- You were not prepared for the session and had not attempted the assigned preparatory work
- You did not speak at all
- You were engaged in group discussions at a minimal level

Zero

- You did not attend the session

The questionnaire defines participation in terms of preparation and contribution. On reflection it would be more effective to separate these two aspects. For example, how would you rank participation if you had thoroughly prepared but did not contribute during the session?

The study was conducted with 14 final-year accounting students. The students were made aware from the outset that the results were confidential and would be used only for the purposes of the study.

The questionnaire was completed by students attending the tutorial at the end of 9 of the 12 tutorial sessions over the course of the semester. Students who did not attend the tutorials received a default participation score of zero. At the end of the semester students completed a further questionnaire on their attitudes towards the tutorial process.

Results and commentary

A summary of the findings are presented in Table 1:

Table 1: Summary of participation scores

Participation score		% of total responses
4	Excellent	6.35
3	Good	31.75
2	Satisfactory	27.78
1	Poor	7.14
0	Absent	26.98
Total		100.00

The two key features of these findings are:

1. The high level of absenteeism (over a quarter of the sample) but
2. The relatively high levels of participation reported by the students who did attend.

It is clearly a matter of concern that in this study one in four students did not attend a given tutorial session. However, the problem is quite concentrated. The average attendance rate for the three students with the worst attendance record was 44% which compares with 85% for the rest.

Interestingly, the study also indicated a connection between those students with a poor attendance record and their perceived participation levels. The three poor attendees had a mean participation score of 2 compared with 2.5 for the students overall. This indicates that a minority of students are less engaged in the tutorial process both in terms of attendance and in their level of active participation.

The relatively high participation scores overall are consistent with the high level of importance students attach to tutorials as part of the learning process. Participants were asked to rank their top three learning activities. The results are presented in Table 2.

Table 2: Student ranking of learning activities

Learning activity	Importance ranking
Tutorials	1
Exam revision	2
WebCT materials	3
Lectures	4
Private reading/study	5
Informal discussions	6

Students were also asked about factors which prevented active participation. The most common responses were around lack of confidence and fear of making a mistake. Typical responses include the following:

“Sometimes I am unsure about the answer and I feel as if I’ll make a fool out of myself”

“I am not confident enough to express my views in front of the class”

“Sometimes I may not fully understand the topic/issues covered, therefore I won’t feel confident participating actively”

This indicates that contribution levels during tutorials may not indicate a lack of preparation and may also suggest that tutorials should be conducted in an informal and supportive atmosphere (Anderson, 1997).

Finally, although the study was too small to draw any statistically significant inferences, it does suggest a positive relationship between tutorial participation and exam performance as indicated in Table 3.

Table 3: Relationship between participation and assessment performance

Tutorial Participation Score	No of Students	Average Exam Mark
20 or over	4	50.8
10 to 19	7	48.1
less than 10	3	44.0

Conclusions

The small scale of this study means that it is inappropriate to generalise but the key points seem to be that:

- Tutorials are regarded by these students as being the most important single element in their learning process
- Although there is a real problem with tutorial attendance, this is quite concentrated amongst a minority of students who are generally less engaged in the learning process
- Students regard their participation in tutorials as being reasonably good. At least some of their apparent non-participation may be due to the fear of making a contribution and “getting it wrong”.

The implications for teaching practice are that tutorials are seen as a key element of the student learning experience and tutorial participation may be a useful predictor of assessment performance. The study also suggests that student reticence may be an important inhibitor of active contribution during tutorials.

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